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ABSTRACT

By looking for patterns of errors in the research papers of Asian students, educators can uncover pedagogical strategies to help students avoid repeating such errors. While a good deal of research has identified a number of sentence-level problems which are typical of Asian students writing in English, little attempt has been made to consider the specific problems which a long research paper presents. Of these problems, Asian students have the most difficulty integrating sources from research and developing transition, unity, and cohesion. These problems stem not necessarily from different thought patterns or primary language interference, but from the challenge of dealing with two different rhetorical systems. Asian students also tend to over-rely on formulas and patterns by mimicking models or sample papers. Another problem, blatant plagiarism, may be related to an Oriental emphasis on memorization and an inability or unwillingness to paraphrase. Asian students also often have difficulty with research as a process. Generally, these errors seem due to different educational and rhetorical backgrounds, so that the most effective pedagogy will not dismiss their previous training, but integrate it and build on it. (Fifteen references are attached.) (HB)

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Chris Crowe, Brigham Young University–Hawaii
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At BYU--Hawaii, we have noticed that Asian students, 21% of our student population, have a slightly more difficult time passing our junior-level research and composition course than most students--a 79% pass rate versus a 84% pass rate for all students--and we began looking for factors that might explain this. It was our hope that if indeed there is a pattern of errors for Asian students, that we might uncover some pedagogical strategies to help them avoid such errors.

After reviewing literature about the writing of foreign--especially Asian--students and reviewing the file of research papers written for the advanced composition sections, we interviewed Asian students and our most experienced teachers of advanced composition. Our findings have helped us understand the problems these students face in our classes. We hope our findings will be helpful to others who also teach in culturally diverse settings.

In Anatomy of Rhetoric, Kaplan suggests that foreign students have a te ncy to revert to stylistic conventions--Kaplan uses parallelism as an example--from their native language en writing essays in English (34-65). Garner concurs by saying that many foreign students struggle in English composition because they tend to write in rhetorical styles unique to their own language and culture (129). Halio, a graduate adviser to many Asian students, notes that many foreign students' graduate reports were written in a style that rankled their respective advisers. "[I]t was clear," she says, "that students writing dissertations and theses had to do more than learn English to be able to write 'American'" (132). This challenge must even be greater for our undergraduates.

Consider the perspectives the following quotes reveal about Asian students' misconceptions and experiences in the American writing classroom. The first is from a Chinese student experiencing perhaps her first response from an American instructor:

> When an American teacher puts a ? by what I like best, it seems to pour a basin of cold water on me. (qtd. in Matalene 802)

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And from a Japanese student newly-arrived on our campus describing her perception of research papers:

> . . . I don't know how to do it because it's too long; too hard . . . and sometimes someone takes almost a week or something to write one!
>
> (Mizuno)

Both of these show the cultural and experiential gap we must deal with in our classrooms.

Our interviews with teachers of advanced composition revealed similar challenges faced by Asian students. And while the literature we reviewed and the responses we received from our colleagues confirmed that Asian students typically struggle with second-language diction and grammatical errors such as idiom, syntax, subject-verb agreement, and verb tense, much has been written on such problems. We wanted to look beyond the sentence level, at the workings of a long research paper and the specific problems this writing task presents to Asian students.

Of these problems, Asian students have most difficulty integrating sources from research and developing transition, unity, and cohesion. While these are not unique to Asian students, most instructors felt such problems were more common in these students' papers. The most frequent response from instructors described awkward transition. Asian students, their teachers said, tended to favor one-word, mechanical transition (described by some as "blatant transition" or "artificial transition"), overusing certain expressions such as "moreover." Related to this are papers which have organizational problems and lack unity. A few teachers made reference to a kind of "wandering pattern" of organization in the papers. This could lead to a lack of coherence at the paragraph level, which our instructors also described. This lack of internal transition, or in-paragraph transition, as some called it, became especially obvious when students attempted to blend research material into their own text.

We conclude that these three problems, transition, unity, and cohesion problems, stem not necessarily from different cultural thought patterns or even from primary-language interference, but instead from the challenge of dealing with two different rhetorical systems. Our interviews revealed that students from Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea are familiar with what Fan Shen describes as an "essential rule." He says, ". . . [I]n

Chinese composition, 'from surface to core' is . . . a rule which means that one ought to reach a topic gradually and 'systematically' instead of abruptly" (462). He says that jumping straight into the topic seems illogical for him (463). While Fan Shen speaks of Chinese composition, our interviews and research show that what he describes is also true in other Oriental rhetorics, such as Japanese and Korean. Suzuki, for example, believes that Japanese readers like to discover the message of a piece of writing through subtle hints left by the writer. He argues that Japanese readers "anticipate with pleasure the opportunities that such writing offers them to savor this kind of 'mystification' of language" (qtd. in Hinds 145). The Japanese student quoted above explains,

> [My teachers taught me to] not write topic sentence at the beginning. You just mention about the things in the beginning and after in the end you can write like the topic sentence, what you wanted to say . . . . Because if I write from beginning like a example or my experience in the first paragraph, and after that I can understand . . . what this author wanted to write or wanted to [have me] read. (Mizuno)

Leaving the responsibility for discovering the meaning of a text to the reader, as opposed to the American idea of the writer being responsible for revealing it, is a component of the rhetorics we studied that leads to "wandering," or what American teachers might call a lack of unity and cohesion. As for the problem of blatant transition, we believe this may be a technique learned in ESL classes or freshman composition courses to deal with the question marks on papers and charges to use "clear transition" these students receive from their American teachers. In some cases we have taught them the very things of which we disapprove.

Our instructors also reported that their Asian students tend to over-rely on formulas and patterns by mimicking models or sample papers. Introductory and concluding paragraphs were especially affected. This weakens their research papers by making them seem "mechanical" and "artificial."

Apparently, the cause of such imitation is twofold. First, none of the students we interviewed were ever given any instruction on how to develop an essay in their native language, let alone in English, except that they were taught to imitate models they had studied. Second, because memorization is an essential part of Oriental education, students from Asia have little experience developing their own rhetorical style or

considering how a piece of writing might best be developed. Their primary experience in responding to academic writing tasks is imitation. Carolyn Matalene, an American who taught in China, reported that her students felt they had learned a story when, "...in fact [they had] memorized it. The usual Chinese response to a literary text is to repeat it, not to paraphrase, analyze, or interpret" (791). Eggington, for example, states that Korean students told him, ". . . if one wishes to write academic prose, one writes in the ki-sung-chon-kyul" (157), which is a set rhetorical pattern they learn from following literary models, and which, like the patterns mentioned in the previous section, is a "surface to core," indirect style. Mohan and Lo warn that we shouldn't assume such inclinations to imitate models is cultural, but that instead "we should . . . pay particular attention to students' previous educational experience" (528). Our Japanese student encapsulates her education as "very mechanical," just like "fill in the blanks" (Mizuno).

Another problem area, plagiarism, is what originally drew us into this study. We wondered why our Asian students had the kind of problems they did with using sources. Instructors said the most common types of plagiarism were quotations treated as paraphrases and "clumps" lifted directly out of original texts with neither citations nor quotation marks. A related weakness was an over-reliance on direct quotation, some students avoiding paraphrasing altogether. Both of these reveal either an inability or an unwillingness on the students' parts to venture into paraphrase.

This, on one hand, is related to how confident the students feel with their second language. One student from Hong Kong wondered why he should paraphrase text when a native English speaker has already said it effectively (Tang).

On the other hand, we must remember that these students come from educational systems which not only rely on memorization, but include memory, with its classical rhetorical sense of recall, in their definition of literacy. This same student says that in his high school they would quote verbatim a well-known source on a subject they were writing about. He said that if they paraphrased, people would think, "Seems odd, this guy forgot where he got it and who said it." Sherman Han, a colleague from Taiwan who has taught Chinese and English both here and in Taiwan, agrees that the ability to recite from an expert verbatim indicates literacy. He points out that this also means that Chinese students at least are familiar with using sources in

their writing, though they might be unfamiliar with our American idea of academic research. He says that students wouldn't necessarily be familiar with documentation, though they are taught to give credit to a source, since referring to the expert reflects on their own intellectual standing.

Instructors also indicated that our Asian students often have difficulty dealing with research as a process. While Asian students seem to have little difficulty in finding an adequate number of sources for their research papers (most instructors even say they were better at finding sources than other students), these students often rely far too heavily on one or two key sources in writing their papers and drawing their conclusions.

Professor Han, who rightly does not see Asian students as inferior academically, did say that if this group struggles more than other groups, it is in their ability to integrate several sources or perspectives on one topic. He believes that since their learning has been based on memorization, they have no experience analyzing or evaluating sources. It is natural, then, for them to rely on only one or two sources to explain an idea. We conclude that it would be equally unnatural, considering their training, to bring in several sources if these sources might prove redundant. Given what we have found about the emphasis on reader-responsible rhetorics and the notions of literacy we've discussed, in these students' opinions, redundancy would also weaken writing.

And while our Asian students are familiar with citing sources, none of the students we interviewed had ever been sent to a library in their native country to do research, except those who did senior papers, and all they did was find papers by graduates to imitate. A Japanese professor of English at Fukushima Medical College in Japan told us that after elementary school, there is no formal writing instruction in Japanese or English in Japanese secondary and post secondary institutions, nor formal instruction in library research (Hikichi). Again, very little in their experience prepares our Asian students for the kind of academic research required in American colleges and universities.

Given these problems and what we perceive as their causes, what are we to do if we feel research is an important component of our curriculum? Perhaps some of the errors or problems we have discussed are

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not as serious as we thought when we began this study. We have come to several conclusions which seem to lend direction to our work.

First, these errors--those other than grammar and diction errors--seem due not to native-language interference as we originally thought, but to different educational and rhetorical backgrounds. Understanding this, we simply need to teach to the strengths of the rhetorics students bring into the class, such as their experience using experts and models. Effective models of academic writing can provide not only a method for students to learn possible ways to organize a paper by introducing them to Western rhetorics, but can also provide examples of how to paraphrase and quote effectively. Such models may also help students understand how writers integrate several experts' ideas and words into one presentation. Since these students essentially have no prior experience with many basic principles we assume students bring to our courses, we must teach them. What we have found, though, is that our Asian students pick up these methods quickly <u>because</u> of their educational background and their experience with memorization. To deal with the problem, then, we should not dismiss their previous training, but integrate it and build on it.

To begin the integration, Hinds suggests that we need to help our students understand that "the writing process in English involves a different set of assumptions from the ones they are accustomed to working with" (152). The answer, though, seems to be that we shouldn't have them separate their rhetorical assumptions from the academic rhetorics we teach, but have them make connections. Professor Hikichi says we need to "teach them right from the beginning" about writing research papers. If given models and specific instructions, these students, because of their backgrounds, will quickly come to understand what we expect of them in their academic research and writing. By doing this and looking for our options in teaching, we can then follow Kaplan's charge "to increase the size of the inventory [of possible composing alternatives], to stipulate the sociolinguistic constraints, and to illustrate the ways in which the choice limits the . . . text" ("Cultural Thought Patterns Revisited" 11). And by learning the limits we put on the texts they are to write, our Asian students learn to perform and report the kind of research we hope for in our courses.

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